

Extending the Lesson - Lesson 1:
A Civic Dilemma: Lincoln and the Civil War

FACT SHEET #1

Abraham Lincoln is usually ranked by historians as one of the best presidents in the history of the United States, yet he presided over a time of great political division and tragedy. Conflicts that eventually erupted in the Civil War had been brewing since the birth of the nation. Most citizens of the South believed that they had every right to break away from the United States and form a new country. In 1776, the Declaration of Independence asserted America's right to break away from Great Britain—it clearly states, “. . . governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed: that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government . . .” By 1860, Southerners felt the federal government did not represent their interests and had, in fact, become destructive to the maintenance of their chosen way of life. But the Declaration of Independence also states that “all men are created equal,” yet slavery was the foundation of Southern culture. Still, the Declaration of Independence is not the governing document of the United States. The Constitution defines the powers of the federal and state governments and the rights and responsibilities of the people. Lincoln did not believe that the Confederacy had a legitimate right to exist, and he was very clear that his ultimate goal was to preserve the Union. Lincoln opposed slavery, yet in August of 1862 he said, “If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.”